

IMPROVING COHERENCE IN PARAGRAPH WRITING AMONG ESL LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY

Masputeriah Hamzah & Malini Karuppiah
Faculty Of Education
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Abstract: This study sets out to examine the problems faced by ESL learners of the Faculty of Education, UTM in relation to coherence in writing. The objectives of this study are to assess the coherence of ESL learners' writing as well as to present ideas and suggestions to help students to improve coherence in their writing. Ten first year TESL students of UTM were involved in this study. The instrument used to assess and analyze coherence in writing was topic-based analysis adapted from Todd (2004). Scores of coherence and coherence breaks as well as interviews were used for data analysis. Finally, this study hopes to be a valuable resource for not only the learners to overcome incoherence in their writing, but also to both content and English language instructors of these learners. It would provide insights to the language teachers on how to help students become more aware of elements of coherence in writing and what can be done to improve coherence in writing.

Abstrak: Kajian ini adalah bertujuan untuk mengkaji masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh para pelajar yang mengambil kursus Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua, Fakulti Pendidikan, UTM dari segi kesinambungan dalam penulisan karangan. Objektif utama kajian tersebut adalah untuk menilai tahap kesinambungan penulisan para pelajar. Selain itu, beberapa idea dan cadangan untuk memperbaiki tahap kesinambungan dalam penulisan karangan juga turut disertakan dalam kajian yang ini. Sepuluh pelajar tahun satu TESL dari UTM merupakan responden kajian. Instrumen yang telah digunakan untuk mengukur tahap kesinambungan dalam penulisan merupakan analisis berasaskan topik yang diadaptasikan daripada Todd (2004). Analisis data dilakukan dengan menggunakan markah-markah yang diperolehi daripada tahap kesinambungan serta temu bual dengan pensyarah. Diharap agar kajian ini akan menjadi sebuah sumber yang berguna bukan sahaja untuk para pelajar malah kepada para pendidik Bahasa Inggeris pelajar-pelajar tersebut. Kajian ini akan memberi kesedaran kepada para pendidik Bahasa Inggeris tentang cara-cara untuk membantu para pelajar memberi fokus terhadap elemen-elemen kesinambungan dalam penulisan serta bagaimana untuk memperbaiki kesinambungan dalam penulisan mereka.

Keyword: improving coherence in paragraph writing, esl learners

Introduction

Statement of Problem

Although coherence is crucial to effective writing, it is often considered an abstract, indefinable, and controversial concept that is difficult to teach and difficult to learn. ESL students focus almost entirely on the word and sentence levels rather than the level of the whole discourse, that is, textual coherence. According to Enkvist (1990), the majority of ESL students feel that the only tool they can use in writing English essays is grammar and this causes them to have difficulty in making their writing coherent.

Given the situation, it is important that the students be taught alternative strategies to improve coherence in their writing. Focus on coherence can shift students' attention from sentence-level grammar to discourse features such as textual structuring and unity, which are crucial to creating meaning in texts.

Indeed, helping students improve the coherence of their writing is a significant aspect of L2 writing instruction.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- 1 to assess the coherence of ESL learners' writing
- 2 to present ideas and suggestions to help students to improve coherence in their writing

Significance of the Study

This study would provide insights to language teachers on how to help students become more aware of elements of coherence in writing and what can be done to improve coherence in writing.

Scope of the Study

This study involves ten first year TESL students from the Faculty of Education in UTM who are enrolled in the Effective Writing Skill class. The respondents are randomly selected by the researcher. The data is collected via writing exercises which are given by the lecturer in a normal class session. The respondents are required to write an expository essay given by their lecturer.

Methodology

Research Instrument

This research utilizes only the qualitative research methodology. The instrument which was used by the researcher to collect the data is students' essays. The students have been taught about coherence in writing. They are given examples of the various elements of coherence and the characteristics of coherent writing.

Only then, the students are given the task to write a paragraph on the topic of their choice to apply what has been taught earlier in class.

This is a descriptive study in which the researcher with the help of a very experienced lecturer examined the scripts collected from the respondents and look out for errors of coherence in the respondents' writings.

The lecturer who examined the scripts collected from the respondents has a very good experience as a language teacher. He has a Masters in Linguistics for English Language Teaching (ELT). He had five years experience of teaching English in school. He has been teaching in UTM for the past 23 years. Besides that, he had experience in teaching proficiency classes for five years too. The marker also had experience in marking all levels of English Language public examination papers such as the PMR, SPM and MUET except the primary.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were ten first year students who are enrolled in Effective Writing Skill classes from the Faculty of Education, UTM. The respondents consisted of both males and females from TESL (SPL) course. They were required to write a paragraph on the topic of their choice as part of the activity given by the lecturer in class.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the problems that students have in relation to coherence in writing?

In order to seek the answers and findings for this research question, ten essay scripts have been marked and analyzed. The overall score given is 10. The scores which have been obtained by each student are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Lecturer's marks for coherence

Student	Score (out of 10)
A	7
B	5
C	6
D	6
E	4
F	3½
G	6
H	6½
I	4½
J	5½

From Table 1, it can be seen that there appears to be a reasonable amount of variation in the lecturer's marks for coherence. The scores of six out of ten students are at satisfactory level. The scores of the rest of the students are below average which is 4 and below. Based from the scores obtained by the students as been shown in Table 1, it is clear that the students do have problems in relation to coherence in writing. The application of topic-based analysis to the 10 paragraphs produced different numbers of coherence breaks for each text. The lecturer was asked to identify points where there seemed to be an abrupt shift in ideas. The scores are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Coherence scores

Student	Number of coherence breaks
A	0
B	2
C	1
D	1
E	3
F	4
G	1
H	0
I	3
J	2
Total	17

Table 2 shows the coherence scores generated by the lecturer by topic-based analysis. The total number of coherence breaks which has been identified by the lecturer is seventeen. Based on the table above, it can be clearly seen that student A got the least score out of ten. There seemed to be no coherence shifts in her work. The highest number of shifts in coherence is from student F's work. By referring to Table 1 and 2, it is clear that eight out of ten students have problems in relation to coherence in writing.

From the table, students A and H seemed to have no problems in writing coherently because there is no coherence breaks in their work. They are therefore discounted from further analysis.

Table 1 and 2 shows us that eight out of the ten respondents have problems regarding coherence in writing. To seek and identify the problems that the students encounter in relation to coherence in writing, the comments given by the lecturer (marker) was analyzed. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Problems identified by the lecturer (marker)

Problems	Number of students
1. The absence of an introduction/controlling idea	2
2. Statement/idea does not logically develop from the discussion	2
3. Supporting sentences do not reflect the thesis statement	1
4. Wrong usage of discourse markers to link sentences	1
5. No thematic focus.	1
6. Wrong choice of words that affect coherence	1
7. Wrong use of linkers	2
8. Conclusion is not logically developed from the preceding sentences	2

Table 3 shows the problems in coherence faced by the students, which are identified by the lecturer while marking the essay scripts. Statement or ideas which do not logically develop from the discussion seemed to be pervasive resulting in lack of coherence. The lecturer even commented that the conclusion made by the students is not logically developed from the preceding sentences as well as the absence of an introduction.

Besides the topic-based analysis and the comments used to identify the problems faced by the students in relation to coherence in writing, the lecturer was interviewed by the researcher. The interview questions were based on and adapted from the coherence checklist which was suggested by Lee (2006) based on her study of coherence.

Based on the results of the interview, it can be seen that most of the students' writing is incoherent because when they write, there is no specific audience and context given. When the two categories (audience and context) lack awareness, there is absolutely no purpose of writing. When there is no purpose of writing, the students seemed to not write logically and coherently.

Based on the result of the interview, the lecturer found out that propositional content has been used by the students to write. Some of them are the linkers and discourse markers, lexical chain, repetition of words and the use of cohesive devices. Problems in coherence occur when the students do not use the propositional content correctly and clearly in their writing. They are not developed and logically linked from the previous sentences.

Tables 1 and 2 above have evidently shown that the students do have problems in relation to coherence in writing. This could be seen in Table 1 because there appears to be a reasonable amount of variation in lecturer's marks for coherence. The lowest mark is 3½ out of 10 whereas the highest mark is 7 out of 10. From Table 2, it has proven that the lecturer has identified those points in the text where there is a break in coherence. The number of coherence breaks identified by the lecturer by using topic-based analysis was 17. Problems regarding coherence in writing which have been identified by the lecturer while marking the students work are clearly shown in Table 3.

Research Question 2: What are some suggestions on systematic approaches that can be adopted to make students more aware of coherence in writing?

The lecturer who marked the respondents' writing scripts has been interviewed to seek answers for this research question. Besides that, the researcher has also adopted some suggestions and approaches to answer this question from articles obtained from the internet.

Coherence in writing can be achieved through the repetition of key words. This is because repeating words is important to the sense of a paragraph's message. Such repetition emphasizes a word, connecting it through several sentences to tie them together internally. Sometimes, however, repetition becomes boring and monotonous. The repeated words should not be allowed to dominate as well. Repetition adds nothing to the sense of the paragraph; rather than pulling thoughts together more effectively.

One of the easiest ways to form a coherent link between sentences within a paragraph is through coordination and subordination. All sentences are, of course, subordinate to the topic sentence. Subordination shows how some thoughts are secondary to others while coordination shows how thoughts are equal. The balancing of ideas in a varied, rhythmic pattern provides a smooth flow from sentence to sentence within a paragraph. Without careful subordination and coordination, the paragraph sometimes dwindles to a list of simple sentences.

Coherence in writing can be achieved through parallel structure. Parallel structures are created by constructing two or more phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structure and use the same parts of speech. By creating parallel structures you make your sentences clearer and easier to read. In addition, repeating a pattern in a series of consecutive sentences helps your reader see the connections between ideas.

Another way to gain coherence is to keep verb tenses and pronoun number consistent within the paragraph. Blatant shifts in time or person scare the reader. If you begin a discussion in the present tense, do not jump to the past tense in the next sentence because the shift in tense within the description immediately confuses the time intended.

The teacher can use tree diagram consistently in her teaching. Using the tree diagram could actually help students to diagnose their own writing and more importantly improve their grades. This in part motivates the students to use the tree diagram to plan their writing too. Planning their ideas using the tree diagram will help them to be more efficient as it is easy to write when all the ideas are already laid out in the diagram. Furthermore, the ideas could be easily toggled around and edited if in the process of writing, they discovered more interesting ideas to write about.

Besides the tree diagram, concept maps can also be used to show the hierarchy of ideas in a paragraph or an essay. In addition, these graphic organizers lend to flexible extension in their use as they can easily branch out to include cause and effect relationships or even to compare and contrast ideas. The primary criterion is that the graphic organizer has to meet the students' needs and be consistently applied for students to really understand how it will help them in their writing.

In the classroom, the teaching of coherence can reap some immediate benefits for both teachers and learners. Teachers can share the metalanguage of coherence with students, replacing unclear comments like “the essay lacks unity” or “the ideas do not fit together” with specific comments like “unclear reference,” “inappropriate conjunction,” or “under-use of metadiscourse here.” Thus, teacher feedback can be made more effective. Students can use a coherence checklist to self-edit and to review their peers’ writing. Indeed, though coherence is difficult to learn, it need not be an abstract theory that is remote from practice. It can be a concrete concept that can be described, taught, and learnt in the classroom.

Conclusion

All in all, it can be seen that there are actually many ways to improve coherence in composition writing among ESL learners. From the analysis and findings of this research, it is evident that the students faced problems in relation to coherence while they write an essay. The responses given by the marker through the interview conducted also complement the findings of this research. Throughout the study, all the respondents have managed to give their utmost cooperation and support. The respondents’ ability in transferring their writing experience into reflective accounts of what they have undergone when they were taught writing skills indeed provide fruitful and beneficial insights in support with the overall study as a whole.

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